UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

Thursdays at Noon | A Liminal Space: Asher Ian Armstrong, *piano*

Thursday, March 6 at 12:10pm | Walter Hall, 80 Queens Park

The Thursdays at Noon series is made possible in part by the Jay Telfer Forum Endowment Fund.

PROGRAM

Prélude No. 1, Moderato assai (1917)
Henriëtte Bosmans (1895-1952)

Prelude No. 5, Dirge (1939)
Jean Coulthard (1908-2000)

Prélude No. 2, Lento assai (1917)
Henriëtte Bosmans

Prelude No. 8, Song (1939)
Jean Coulthard

Four Sketches (1926)
Varvara Gaigerova (1903-1944)

I. Andante sostenuto
II. Agitato
III. Lento
IV. Appassionato

Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 1 (1925)
Varvara Gaigerova

Piano Sonata, Op. 6 (1918)
Ilse Fromm-Michaels (1888-1986)

I. Markig
II. Sehr langsam. Frei im Zeitmaß
III. Lebhaft, aber nicht schnell

Nocturne (1926)
Katherine Parker (1886-1971)

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

As part of the Faculty's commitment to improving Indigenous inclusion, we call upon all members of our community to start/continue their personal journeys towards understanding and acknowledging Indigenous peoples' histories, truths and cultures. Visit indigenous.utoronto.ca to learn more.

PROGRAM NOTES

The interbellum Twentieth century offers one of the most fascinating ecosystems of piano music – one which tends to be dominated by works like the sonatas of Berg and Scriabin, the préludes of Debussy, the character pieces of Prokofiev and Barber (all established repertoire, played and heard every season). This recital is an act of advocacy, positing an "alternative" cross-section of repertoire – rarely-heard "outcast" works written by women between the two World Wars – as worthy contributions to a more equitable, inclusive piano literature.

Prélude No. 1, Moderato assai (1917)

Henriëtte Bosmans (1895-1952)

Prelude No. 5, Dirge (1939)

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Prélude No. 2, Lento assai (1917)

Henriëtte Bosmans

Prelude No. 8, Song (1939)

Jean Coulthard

The cycle of piano preludes by Dutch composer Henriëtte Bosmans is one of her first compositions. An accomplished concert pianist, she is known to have performed this work at a solo recital in 1918 alongside other enormous, virtuoso works (by Reger, Franck, and others) to great acclaim. Her biographer Helen Metzelaar notes that "the title 'prelude' brings to mind Chopin and this composer is certainly a source of inspiration for her"; it may be possible for some listeners to detect the chromaticism of Chopin's A minor prelude in Bosmans' No. 1, or the granitic chordal writing of Chopin's C minor in Bosmans' No. 2; yet, Bosmans' pieces remain distinctive and pianistically-ingenious, deserving of far more attention than they have received.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Canadian composer Jean Coulthard had her eyes "set on the stars," despite being, from her early years, preoccupied with supporting her family due to the death of both her parents in succession; her biographer David Gordon Duke notes "it was no small thing that a young woman, working in a distant and small city in the Canadian West, should think she was destined to a life of musical creation—even though there wasn't a single professional composer, male or female, in the city or province where she lived." In her earliest compositional ventures she too drew inspiration from Romantic sources, and the preludes on this program are in a decidedly "Neo-Romantic" vein, very closely related to those of Bosmans. Yet both these preludes bear the unmistakable touch of Coulthard, illustrating a "duality" she commented on throughout her career: that contrast of "sparkling lyricism and brooding introspection" (Duke). One finds brooding introspection in *Dirge*, while lyricism blossoms beautifully in *Song*.

Four Sketches (1926)

Varvara Gaigerova (1903-1944)

I. Andante sostenuto
II. Agitato
III. Lento
IV. Appassionato

Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 1 (1925)

Varvara Gaigerova

Varvara Gaigerova is an all-but-forgotten name in the musical sphere, and particularly outside of Russia, where it is only in recent years that her music has begun to experience a re-introduction onto concert stages. As with other incandescent female artists – such as Lili Boulanger or Vítězslava Kaprálová – one senses that the repertoire we have inherited might have been vibrantly, astonishingly richer, had Gaigerova not met her premature death (at the age of 40) in the aftermath of the starvation, forbidding cold, and desperate atmosphere of Moscow during Hitler's siege warfare.

Throughout her life, Gaigerova was not unfamiliar with war – she began formal musical study at the Moscow Conservatory in 1914, only to leave in 1917 because of "difficult living situations during the (Russian Revolution)" (Lushnikova). In the aftermath of this civil war, Gaigerova was marked out as needing "rehabilitation" by the Soviet authorities, and forcibly relocated to an agricultural collective in Kazakhstan for 4 years. It may have been in part due to this experience that Gaigerova seems to have cemented a fascination with the minority nationalities of the Soviet Union; not only did she do the field work of transcribing songs "from groups such as the Uzbek, Tatar, Bashkir, Buryat, Kazakh, and Kirghiz," she also composed significant works for "orchestras of traditional instruments" (E. Nelson). She was able to move back to Moscow in 1940: "during the war years, V. Gaigerova took part in more than 700 concerts (...) She traveled to the Bolshoi Theater on foot from Khimki (22 km), returned home late in the evening to her sick mother, and, in the most difficult conditions of cold and lack of facilities, worked at night" (E. Lushnikova). In three years' time of enduring these conditions, she was dead.

"Feelings of sadness and loneliness are characteristic of V. Gaigerova's romantically-contemplative nature and often become the background mood of her music" (E. Lushnikova).

The *Four Sketches* are a glimpse into the expressive world of this richly-gifted artist; an expressive world in which we encounter "tragic coloring" (A. Shevtsova), as well as volcanic outbursts of passion, eerie desolation, and voluptuous, twilit landscapes. The first piece (*Andante sostenuto*) echoes the tragic despondency of other pieces in e-flat minor—one thinks of Brahms's Op. 118, No. 6, or Rachmaninov's Op. 39, No. 5. The music suddenly grows restless, and there is an enormous climax which serves only to precipitate a return of the opening theme, an affirmation of e-flat minor, enchained in helixes of chromatic thirds. The second piece well earns its expressive indication "Agitato"—a kind of etude in 4ths and polyrhythms, it again adopts an ABA structure, with a more rhapsodic inner episode, and the most exultant climax in the whole set. The third piece (*Lento*) seems to illustrate a twilit walk across icy tundra, where every chromatic step leads further away from the opening tonality. Fittingly, this piece ends in a harmonically-ambiguous way – as does the fourth piece (*Appassionato*), which presents the most technically-hazardous moments in the set. A smoldering, Scriabinesque creation, its hell-bent opening is displaced by a more luminous middle section with a weave of rhythmically-opulent textures, almost seeming to reflect the deep, patina-enveiled sapphires and golds of Orthodox iconography. The piece concludes in the tragic atmosphere of its opening, but one senses that "not all the dust has yet settled."

One year prior to composition of the *Four Sketches*, Gaigerova completed what seems to be her only solo piano sonata. Like other examples from the Russian repertoire, she chose a single-movement structure for this work (one thinks of the first sonatas of Prokofiev and Feinberg, and the several single-movement sonatas of Scriabin). The piece, however, arguably outstrips some of those examples; lasting around 8.5 minutes, its sonata-type structure is fascinating and innovative – having something of the "sonata-fantasy" about it. The work opens "in medias res," parachuting the listener into an unpredictable, stormy landscape: its principal theme, a rocket in e minor, is the only distinctive, recognizable element. This gives way to a placid "garden of

lyricism" – its stillness is arresting, and seems somehow the more fragile for it. The theme's beauty, like a Spring rivulet growing into a river, becomes passionate in a manner reminiscent of Tchaikovsky; gradually, as if by becoming too unbuttoned, "wolves are let in the door" – Gaigerova's music never stays tranquil for long! Yet, there is a third theme in this exposition – an exhilarating "heroic" theme in chords, with trenchant octaves beneath. Those interested in sonata form will find some similarities to Chopin's approach in what Gaigerova does here (it is a truncated sonata, with the opening theme missing in the recapitulation), but the symmetry of the form is entirely original. In an architectural choice which balances the structure, Gaigerova also creates one of the most effective and powerful moments in the sonata – this is her extension of the third "Heroic" theme in the recapitulation, which plummets into the bass, eventually maxing out the keyboard's physical limits for the only time in the sonata, bringing this youthful work to its passionate, triumphant conclusion.

Piano Sonata, Op. 6 (1918)

Ilse Fromm-Michaels (1888-1986)

I. Markig
II. Sehr langsam. Frei im Zeitmaß
III. Lebhaft, aber nicht schnell

Like Varvara Gaigerova, Ilse Fromm-Michaels was a casualty of war: "one of the artists whose work and life were drastically affected or even destroyed by the reprisals of National Socialism [...] She had already built a brilliant career as a performing and creative musician but it was violently broken down by the measures of the Nazi regime" (G. Distler-Brendel). Fromm-Michaels was born in Hamburg to a mathematician and a school principal in 1888, and showed musical promise early – already at the age of 13 she relocated to Berlin to pursue serious musical studies (living with an aunt). Here she worked with Pfitzner for a period, and became friends with a young conductor named Otto Klemperer, later moving to conclude her study in Cologne. Even before she had emerged from this formal period of training, she was a formidable artist with a burgeoning concert career laid out before her – her vast repertoire encompassed concertos by Rachmaninov, Reger, and Busoni (the last work alone being enough to illuminate her stature as pianist). Her ability was recognized by Max Reger, whose prohibitively complex Bach Variations she learned in 3 weeks—an anecdote which also points up her devotion to new music (among other such activities are her performance of *Pierrot lunaire* under Schoenberg's baton).

This career was "brilliant but unfortunately brief" (F. Rothenberg); Fromm-Michaels was married to a Jewish man, a district judge, who was forced in 1933 to "voluntarily retire"; because of her marriage, she was forbidden from engaging in any public artistic activities. Additionally, "her contacts in the Third Reich were very limited because there were not many non-Jews who had the moral courage to continue or even establish new relationships with Jews. Those affected became closer." Fromm-Michaels watched as her husband became progressively more and more ill, as relatives emigrated or attempted to, and as others were arrested and taken to concentration camps: the situation was one of "isolation, fear and uncertainty. Fromm-Michaels was under enormous stress due to the threat to her husband and her son (...), the pressure to teach as much as possible, and the *de facto* ban on work" (C. Friedel). Yet, she continued to work and teach in private—her home became a secret sanctuary for others who were the targets of the Nazi regime. Gisela Distler-Brendel notes "I, the daughter of a mixed marriage who was also not allowed to study at university, was a student of Ilse Fromm-Michaels. I experienced the unforgettable, music-filled atmosphere in her house."
An exploration of Fromm-Michaels's music demonstrates again a singular, beautiful and powerful artistic voice; this music's absence from concert stages and music pedagogy makes

the sting of “canon” prejudice exponential. Her first great keyboard masterpiece is the monumental Sonata, Op. 6, in which “one senses her horror at the First World War” (B. Dorn). The first movement (*Markig*) commences with granitic octave batteries which restlessly move from key-to-key before finally arriving in a dark-lit c-sharp minor. The music unctuously glides to c minor, and the first of many barrages of double notes precipitate the refulgent second theme – an exquisite snow-globe of lyricism in an otherwise storm-tossed landscape. The development is filled with hair-raisingly jagged re-imaginings of the theme, some with more than a hint of sulfur, but the volcanic floes eventually come to a full stop at a harmonized restatement of the opening octave contour, and the recapitulation unfolds in a truncated form which still encloses the almost sacredly tender second theme. Rather than providing relief, the second movement (*Sehr langsam, Frei im Zeitmaß*) refocuses the “horror” of the first movement as a stringent funeral march. The dotted rhythms associated with this idea gradually loosen and recede into the background, to make way for a contrastingly lyrical but non-committal theme in thirds. Fromm-Michaels gently achieves the parallel major (C major) by the end of this movement, which organically welcomes the last movement’s f minor tonality. This breathless movement (*Lebhaft, aber nicht schnell*) contains the most hazardous – and explosive – moments in the whole sonata; beginning with an undulating, restless theme with a conspicuous slide of chromatic triads at its centre, the music quickly reaches an almost over-extended, blistering chordal theme set in the extremes of the keyboard’s range (easily living up to Fromm-Michaels expressive indication *massig*). The movement’s middle episode is something of a contrapuntal briar-patch, but provides a brief rhythmic oasis; once emerging from this resting point, the music seems to proceed on a controlled, slow-burning fuse. Fromm-Michaels holds her one “FFFF” in reserve until the music’s most white-hot moment, when the hard-won dominant has finally been established; yet, the most harrowing moment is still to come: an epic keyboard-wide climax replete with double-note textures – the aural effect being a true “cathedral of sound.”
At the conclusion of World War Two, the artistic and wider world Fromm-Michaels had known was forever changed; her husband died in 1946, and from 1949, she stopped composing: “her creative powers were broken” (G. Distler-Brendel). Yet, it is not just the interruption of her career, but the combined “general neglect of women artists which (has denied) Fromm-Michaels the respect and attention she deserves. Her death on January 22, 1986, at age 97, ended a long career devoted to music, first as a performer and composer, and in her later years, as a teacher” (F. Rothenberg). It is time the music of this remarkable and inspiring woman was widely and regularly heard.

Nocturne (1926)

Katherine Parker (1886-1971)

The 1926 *Nocturne* by Katherine Parker was written in the same time as many of the pieces above, but its composers hails from the other side of the world: Australia. Yet, like the other works heard today, this piece has gone missing from the concert stage without a suitable reason, given its high artistic merit. A disarmingly gorgeous tune is presented in the “celestial” key of F-sharp major, yet by the piece’s end it has settled comfortably into A major; throughout, Parker pays homage to Chopinesque “fioritura” and canvassing accompaniment expected of the genre, but there is something singular about the way her music inhabits the keyboard; while beautiful to hear, there is perhaps an extra “topographical” layer of beauty that only the performer can fully appreciate.